

IN THAT NUMBER

A DEVOTIONAL JOURNEY

THROUGH NUMBERS

BY

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1. Work for All

Each was assigned his work (Numbers 4:49).

"Each" refers to each male Levite, the priestly group in Israel. In the New Covenant fellowship all are priests and all have some kind and measure of kingdom work to do.

The gifts of the Spirit determine each person's place in the work of the church. Not all are equally gifted, but all are gifted, and no person's task is unimportant. Our work may often be inconspicuous, but never insignificant.

The Lord has gifted some to preach, teach and write. He has gifted even more to encourage, to share with the needy, and to cheerfully show mercy. In these ways they enjoy serving him by helping others.

As we develop and utilize our gifts, the Lord ministers to our needs through the gifts exercised by our brothers and sisters in Christ. He creates a church of interdependent persons, not independent persons. Paul likens it to the various organs which work together for the welfare of the whole body.

For this simple, elaborate, inter-working of ministries in the church, we owe the Lord constant praise. Most of us must confess that we have received more than we have contributed. Our constant prayer is "Help us to do better, Lord."

2. A Nazarite Inwardly

Throughout the period of his separation to the Lord he must not go near a dead body (Numbers 6:6).

This Nazarite rule would keep a fellow from Sunday services in many churches. In much formal Christianity the singing is dead, the praying is dead, the sermons are dead, the responses are dead--the whole service is dead, dead, dead--doorknob dead. The sanctuary becomes a mortuary, and the "worship" leaves people unchallenged and unchanged in their sins.

The Nazarite was alive, a man on a mission, a person devoted to God's service with "one thing I do" concentration. How unfocussed are those who bear the Lord's name but "do theirr own thing."

I don't want to be a Nazarite outwardly. Beard and ear locks would not help me, and I'm already a permanent teetotaler. But I want to be a Nazarite inwardly--a man under oath to do God's will, to serve God's people, to battle God's enemies and to advance God's kingdom. It troubles me when worldly churchmen do not think I am fanatical.

Touching the dead is hard to avoid. Touching the living is easier to do but they are harder to find.

3. Your Name on Me

So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them
(Numbers 6:27).

The Lord's "name" identifies him. It stands for who he is and what he does. It distinguishes him from all the so-called gods. It signifies creator, redeemer and governor of his people. His name is the epitome of love, power, wisdom, justice and holiness. To have that name put on us is the greatest of all human experiences and privileges.

With the Lord, a benediction is no light matter. Only we can reduce it to an empty ritual. We slander his name when we allow the benediction to rattle in our ears with deadening familiarity. Where it is heard and received in grateful faith, it conveys all the graces for which his name stands. It is the fitting climax of true worship.

Lord, speak and act to put your name on us. Activate within us the creative, redemptive and providential forces resident in your name. By what you are and do for us, let us become what we should be for you and achieve what we should do for you.

4. Atonement and Dialogue

When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony (Numbers 7:89).

This teaches us that atonement restores dialogue between the Lord and his human creatures.

God created man as his speech partner. His first recorded action, after man's creation, was to speak to him.

Sin violated that beautiful relationship. Man heard God unwillingly, fearing him and trying to hide from him. He answered God's call reluctantly and deceitfully. How much of our noise is an effort to distract ourselves from what you are saying?

Moses came to the Tabernacle wanting to speak with the Lord. He desired communion and conversation with his maker and master. The Lord's voice, coming from the place of atonement, made it clear that happy dialogue follows the putting away of our sins through sacrifice.

Through the cross of Christ dialogue with God is restored. Our sins atoned for, we are invited to re-enter a speech-partnership, invited to be again what God intended when he created man. **Awesome!**

5. Guided Trek

At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped (Numbers 9:17).

The Lord guided his people. They did not mill around like an abandoned flock. All their starts, steps and stops were done at the Lord's command.

The journey that the Lord guides is never wasted. His people do not always understand why and when and where, but he is unerring in wisdom and invincible in power. The paths he chooses and the times he orders are for our highest good.

There have been surprising turns in the route he has led us along. There have been long days and scary nights, steep climbs and rough detours. There have been pain and pleasure, approval and chastening, but all that puzzled us has been plain to our Lord.

He did not hand us a map and say, "Go." He has been with us every step of the long march homeward. Those with whom we have traveled have contributed both joy and grief to our lives as we have to theirs. Our supreme joy has been the awareness of the Lord's presence. Our deepest grief has been the times when we got out of step with him. Lead on, O Lord!

6. Trumpet Blasts

When you go into battle...sound a blast on the trumpets.... you are to sound the trumpet over your burnt offerings (Numbers 10:9, 10).

We need to hear the trumpet blasts that call to war and to worship.

Christianity is warfare, not a picnic. Its symbol is a cross, not a cushion. A powerful and persistent enemy, as cruel as he is cunning, opposes God's people and their mission. His army is immense, his weapons are mighty and his strategies are clever. But God's people, doing battle in God's strength, are invincible! We are not excused from battle, but we are assured of victory. Do not refuse to answer the trumpet blast.

The call to worship must find us equally responsive. We need to join God's people in celebration of his atoning sacrifice. We need to join them in offering ourselves as living sacrifices, to be employed for service and deployed as soldiers.

We do not fight alone. We are fighting a war, not a duel. We need to train with God's people, battle with God's people and celebrate triumphs with God's people.

Sound the trumpets! We will come.

7. Enriched in Fellowship

If you will come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us (Numbers 10:32).

If we wish to share the spoils of victory, we must share the strain of marching and the risks of fighting. The booty comes with the battle.

A fellow in Florida used to strut around with military decorations pinned to his shirt. He didn't win them in combat; he bought them in pawn shops. They were as vacant of meaning as he was of honor.

If we would share the Lord's provisions we must journey with his people. We cannot know and serve him if we despise and reject them. What he gives them is ours, too, if we are with them. We forfeit our share if we desert their company. He is not saving unrelated and isolated individuals. He is saving a community of believers. He is the vine and they are the branches. We cannot be severed from them and remain united with him.

Let us rejoice in the Lord's people and in our share of his gifts to them.

8. Shared Burdens

They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone (Numbers 11:17).

Many of us know how Moses felt when he exclaimed, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me" (v. 14).

Sam Young used to tell us, "God will either lighten your load or increase your strength." That has proved true over years of ministry, both with backbreaking and heartbreaking loads.

God also provides another relief from burdens--people to share the task of leadership. Seventy elders of proven worth, filled with his Spirit, were chosen to assist Moses. Leaders who are wise enough, secure enough and humble enough to delegate authority and responsibility will find the shared burden has been emptied of its destructive potential.

More important than the council of elders was God's presence. At the outset he had promised Moses, "I will be with you." He responds to the seemingly impossible by asking, "Is the Lord's arm too short?" (v. 23).

God provides ways to keep burdens from becoming breakdowns. He reduces our burdens, augments our strength, increases the bearers, and upholds us with his almighty arms.

9. Unselfish Leadership

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them (Numbers 11:29).

Moses was not jealous of his office or privileges or reputation. He was humbly willing for his own blessings to be universalized. He knew that it was God's sovereign right to choose the servants who would declare his word, and to employ them when and where he desired.

Moses knew, too, that if all were prophets none would be non-profit. Each anointed mind and mouth would be helpful in bringing to maturity the children of Israel. Moses wisely desired and appreciated all the help he could get.

Pentecost was a dramatic fulfillment of Moses' wish. There all were filled with the Spirit and all spoke God's message--men and women, young and old, masters and servants (Acts 2:1-21). Lord, do it again!

Like Moses, let us be grateful and glad for what God is doing through others. Let us be envious of none and encouraging to all.

10. Graves of Lust

...there they buried the people who had craved other food
(Numbers 11:34).

The unspiritual can never be content. Those who live for sensual gratification are doomed to die unsatisfied. Whatever the names of their cemeteries, they will lie in "graves of lust." God made us for himself, as Augustine long ago said, and our hearts have no peace until they rest in him.

The "graves of lust" form a huge burial ground, for the masses seek blindly and defiantly to find satisfaction in material things and sensual pleasures. When God is omitted from life, nothing can fill the void that results. The addition of things will not compensate for the subtraction of fellowship with him.

We don't know what manna was like, but we have displeased the Lord too often by discontent and ingratitude to be judges of his ancient people. Until he changed our hearts we were heading for Kibroth-Hattaavah. We owe him praise for saving us from our sins and from ourselves. He will teach us, as he did Paul of old, to be content with his will and way--if we stay teachable.

11. A Model of Meekness

Moses was a very humble man (Numbers 12:3).

From Moses we learn that meekness is not weakness. No weak man could have endured and accomplished what Moses did. He was a man of strength, and that's what true meekness is--consecrated and controlled strength.

Consecrated strength does not strut and boast in victory. Rather, it quietly and gratefully gives thanks to God.

Controlled strength does not avenge the critic's slander and opposition. It pities and prays for its enemies, leaving judgment to God.

A greater than Moses said, "I am gentle and humble in heart." And when he was vilified, tortured and being killed he prayed, "Father, forgive them..."

Lord, we want to be like Moses, possessing the strength of humility that does not allow the world to determine our attitudes and reactions. We want to be like you--patient in trials, gracious to opponents and confident in death. Pride and brutality, envy and cruelty are marks of weakness and insecurity. Grant us the meekness which is a fruit of the Spirit.

12. A Privileged Servant

With him I speak face to face (Numbers 12:8).

Humility makes dialogue possible. The proud and the pushy are too full of themselves to be filled with God's Spirit. They can't stop promoting their own agendas long enough to learn what God has in mind. Moses, the humblest of men, had the joy of communion with God.

God's kingdom is radically different from the political systems of earth. In them, the "perks" are reserved for the power brokers, the high and mighty "movers and shakers." In his kingdom, the humblest of persons have the highest of privileges.

God called Moses "my servant." No man could wear a greater title. To be a servant of God is nobler than being a ruler of men. To his servant God spoke clearly, not in riddles. There was communion and revelation.

God's anger burned against Aaron and Miriam for jealously opposing Moses. He rebuked them and then "left them." May the Lord keep us from all that would forfeit his presence and wreck our communion with him. We want to be his faithful servants.

13. A Great Love

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "O God, please heal her!"
(Numbers 12:13).

Moses proved to be a man of great love as well as great humility. Leprous Miriam was under judgment for opposing him, yet he pled for her healing with its implied forgiveness.

Love seeks the good of those who have been bad. Moses did not plead for Miriam on the ground of her merit--she had none. Moses knew that his love reflected God's love, a gracious and forgiving love extended to guilty sinners.

Love seeks reconciliation, not revenge. How easily Moses might have said, "She had it coming. She brought it on herself. Now let her pay the price of her rebellion." Instead, he pled with God for her healing. He knew that God was delighted by a sinner's rebirth, not by a sinner's death.

But Moses pled; he did not command. He knew his place as God's servant and did not attempt to reverse the roles. Love knows that whom God smites only God can heal. Love is content to request that healing, not to demand it.

Lord, make us like Moses! Make us faithful to you and forgiving towards others. Make us compassionate and not vengeful. Rule our hearts by your love. Amen.

14. Can Do!

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it" (Numbers 13:30).

The land of Canaan was God's gift to the people of Israel. But what is given must be taken; otherwise it avails nothing. It was time to act upon his promise and possess the land.

However, the land was filled with strong walls and fierce men. Ten of the twelve spies lost heart, exclaiming, "We can't." Caleb, mighty in faith, filed a courageous minority report: "We can."

Faith's motto is "Can do." Faith measures possibility by God's promise, not by his people's strength or that of the enemy. A little faith in a mighty God can achieve more than a mighty faith in a little god.

God's promise certifies our performance. We can whip giants and topple walls when we act upon his word. What he commands he enables.

Lord, we are facing a few giants in our own lives. We do not ask for an easier way but for a greater trust. Grant each of us a transfusion of Caleb's "can do" spirit.

15. Fear or Faith

We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we looked the same to them (Numbers 13:33).

The ten faithless spies had what Fletcher Spruce called "the grasshopper complex," a frequent ailment in the church. They allowed their opponents to determine their size and strength instead of viewing their possibilities in the light of God's presence and promises.

God can keep grasshoppers a jump ahead of giants. His people may be opposed and pursued, but they need not be defeated. One can chase a thousand, and two can put ten thousand to flight if God orders the battle.

Fear shrinks people; faith enlarges them. Faith shrinks the foe, and fear enlarges them. The solution to the grasshopper complex is faith that looks to God instead of looking at ourselves.

Joshua and Caleb countered the mournful report, saying, "the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." God makes giants vulnerable and grasshoppers invincible. Those who fear him need not fear them.

When the devil calls us grasshoppers, Lord, we shall reply, "Perhaps so, but we are the Lord's grasshoppers."

16. Ask!

In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people.... I have forgiven them, as you asked (Numbers 14: 19, 20).

Moses humbly refused to become the source of a new nation. Instead, he compassionately prayed for the pardon of a rebellious people. He was jealous for the honor of the Lord's name, not for the promotion of his own name. Such leaders seldom come in bunches. Like the proverbial hen's teeth, they are scarce.

"Your great love" was his only ground for interceding. He could not plead their merits--they were morally bankrupt. He could not plead his own deserts--God owed him nothing. Abounding love alone makes forgiveness possible for sinners.

This question haunts us: "What if Moses had not prayed?" God forgave Israel as he asked. "You do not have," wrote James, "because you do not ask God." "Ask," said Jesus, "and it will be given to you." All this challenges us, and keeps us praying for our enslaved loved ones.

O Lord, enlarge our perception of your love, increase our jealousy for your honor, and sustain our intercession for others.

17. No Complaints

I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites
(Numbers 14:27).

Grumbling became habitual with the Israelites. There are too many grumblers in the church as well. Some are predictably negative about everything. If they are talking they are grumbling. If they are silent they are pouting and preparing their next grumbles.

Grumbling never escapes God's hearing or his judgment. The faithless spies who caused the grumbling died of plague. The over-twenty generation was doomed to end their lives in the wilderness. Grumbling caused them to forfeit the promised land.

Lord, we want to be like the Maxwell House coffee slogan--"No grounds for complaint." You are better to us than we deserve. We can say with a psalmist, "I have a delightful inheritance." When we are tempted to grumble, place your restraining hand over our mouths. Let us rather praise you for the countless mercies by which you have enriched our lives.

Your love endures forever, O Lord. We want our gratitude and praise to last as long.

18. Atonement Grounds Forgiveness

...when atonement has been made for him, he will be forgiven
(Numbers 15:28).

Forgiveness awaits atonement. The Lord makes it clear that even "unintentional" sins cannot be forgiven until an atoning offering has been made. Our ignorance of the law is never the ground of our fellowship with God.

Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." But he prayed from the cross, where he was offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Only through the cross could God answer that prayer, for he has decreed "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

Because the sacrifice of Jesus was "once for all," the Lord's forgiveness is always and instantly available. No waiting period is necessary. The offender need bring no other sacrifice. The moment of penitent faith is the moment of gracious and complete forgiveness.

Sin matters, whether it is intentional or unintentional. Reconciliation with God is grounded upon Christ's obedience, not upon our ignorance. We are trusting in his blood.

19. Handling Opposition

It is against the Lord that you and your followers have banded together (Numbers 16:11).

Men who are ambitious to wield authority have always troubled God's people. They do not wish to bear the burdens of leadership, as Moses had been doing, but they want positions and "perks;" they want name and fame.

Those who oppose the leader God chose are rebelling against him. And those who rebel against God are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. At first consumed by their pride, the rebels were at last "swallowed" by the earth.

Moses was well equipped to handle rebellion. He had the comfort of a clear conscience, not having wronged the conspirators so much as a donkey's worth. Moses also had the wisdom to leave his defense and their punishment to God, not seeking to avenge himself.

Lord, whatever opposition we encounter as your servants, enable us to meet it with clear consciences, with wise heads and with forgiving spirits.

20. Sin and Death

...the men who sinned at the cost of their lives (Numbers 16:38).

There is a sense in which every impenitent sins at the cost of his life. God has decreed, "The wages of sin is death." Sin "gives birth to death." All sins are not equal in damaging consequences but all sins tend to death, for all sins separate from God who is our life.

Sin is "unto death" and repentance is "unto life." Only those who repent are forgiven and only the forgiven have life. Repentance is God's gift but our act. Unused, the gift has no power to avert our deaths.

We should take sin seriously for the Lord does. Men have emptied love of holiness and have denied the reality of God's wrath against sin. They advocate a sinning religion that is utterly incongruous with the plain testimony of Scripture. The awful judgments that befell rebels in Moses' day preach a warning message that we ignore to our own peril.

Lord, save us from sin and death! We pray as did a psalmist:
"Keep your servant from willful sins."

21. The Priest's Place

He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped (Numbers 16:48).

It seems to me that this scripture defines the place and the power of every true priest.

No priest can save everyone. God has conferred a measure of freedom upon all persons that makes each person the architect of his or her own destiny.

A priest must save all he can, however, and this he does by standing between the living and the dead as an intercessor. He restrains the commission and consequences of evil as far as possible. He cannot choose for another person, but he can influence the choices of others.

Any person's escape from death, including the priest's, is possible only because atonement has been made for sin.

Jesus, our high priest, stood between the living and the dead when he offered himself for our sins at Calvary. He stands between the living and the dead now as he ever lives to intercede for all that come to God for salvation (Heb. 7:24-28).

We came to God through him. Some of us have been called to serve with him and under him as ministers of the New Covenant. Our privileges and opportunities are great. Our responsibilities are awesome. As lesser priests we depend utterly upon our great high priest. He never fails us.

22. Sprouting Staffs

The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout (Numbers 17:5).

The Lord gives life to dead instruments. Touched by his power the staff of Aaron "sprouted...budded, blossomed and produced..." Dead wood became a living force.

Is this not the sign of any preacher's calling--that he becomes, through God's touch, a source of life and good? Some who occupy the office do not bear its fruit. Despite learning and effort, they remain lifeless sticks, because ministry was their choice, not God's.

When God calls and anoints, some of the most unlikely persons become instruments of life and blessing. God is constantly surprising us by the choices he makes and the fruit they bear.

You certainly stunned a lot of folks when you chose me, Lord! Chief among them was my pastor, who predicted that I would never preach, and that if I did I would fail. He didn't misread me, Lord, but he sure misread you. The dead stick sprouted, budded, blossomed and produced--to the surprise of nearly all and to the glory of only one.

23. Ministry as Gift

I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift (Numbers 18:7).

The Lord's words to Aaron remind us that ministry is a gift, not a prize. Paul said of gospel preaching, "through God's mercy we have this ministry."

No man or woman deserves this privilege. It is not reserved for those who are superior, not confined to persons who are the best educated or the most talented. The gift of ministry often comes strangely wrapped. God has achieved mighty victories through ordinary instruments.

Although the gift argues no special merit, it does confer serious responsibility. The person chosen to minister of God's word stands between God and the people he serves. He is responsible to God and for them. "They keep watch over [the church] as men who must give an account" (Heb. 13:12).

I have always been amazed and grateful that God called me to proclaim his word. Ephesians 3:8 has been my signature verse throughout my ministry, and still is today. God has said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). Enable me, along with all you call to this task, to be a faithful servant, O Lord!

24. God Pays the Clergy

I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do... (Numbers 18:21).

The tithe is the Lord's, not the people's. It always belonged to him, never to them. "The tithe is the Lord's"--it did not become his when paid by the people.

That means that the Lord pays the clergy. The church does not. Those whom God calls to preach are not hirelings. They do not shepherd flocks as persons "greedy for money, but eager to serve." Their salary may be set by the church, but it comes from God's money, not from the church's.

Only by this arrangement can the integrity of pastors and churches be secured. Only thus can the dependence of pastors upon God, and their independence from the people, be preserved.

When a preacher realizes that God will provide his support, not the people, neither his speech nor his silence will be for sale.

Thank you, Lord, for so wise an arrangement.

25. The Lord's Portion

You must present as the Lord's portion the best and holiest part of everything given to you (Numbers 18:29).

The quality of our gifts reflects the value we place upon those to whom we give. If we don't give God our best it's because we don't love him the most. We thus treat him as less than God and make an idol of that to which our best is given.

This portion of the law expresses the Lord's own practice. He gave his best and holiest for us in the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This he did for the glory of his own name, for there is none better or higher or mightier to whom he can offer a sacrifice. That God gave his Son for us does not argue our worth but reveals his love.

Such love deserves our best and holiest. We devalue and insult that love when we offer the Lord anything less than our best.

Our best may not be much, but it affirms that the Lord is worthy and that we are grateful. He will be as pleased to receive it as we are to give it.

26. The Sinless Savior

The man who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person (Numbers 19:19).

One leper cannot heal another. One beggar cannot enrich another. The unclean cannot save the unclean. Those who constitute the problem cannot provide the solution.

That's why Jesus came. He is "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens." He is, therefore, the perfect priest and sacrifice who "meets our need" (Heb. 7:26).

We are the problem; Jesus is the solution. All we have sinned; Jesus is sinless. All we are helpless to save ourselves or each other; he is "able to save completely those who come to God through him." He alone is "the man who is clean"--not ritually only but essentially--and he alone is the savior of mankind. "I am not the Christ" is every person's true confession but his.

Until we meet Jesus, we do not realize how unclean we are. In him we meet one who not only exposes our filthiness but provides our cleansing. Praise his holy and saving name!

27. Rock Water

You will bring water out of the rock (Numbers 20:8).

Water is a life or death commodity for all people, but the issue is sharply accented for desert travelers. Israel's alarm was understandable, but their angry uprising against Moses was reprehensible. However, being treated as a scapegoat by ungrateful rebels has ever been a price of leadership. The Lord knows, for their quarrel was really with him (v. 13). Many quarrel with him, but none ever win those quarrels.

Water from a rock for grumbling ingrates--what a testimony to God's love and power. Here was life from an unexpected source for an undeserving people. It is not difficult to see this as a pointer to Calvary, where the water of life flows from the smitten Jesus who is our rock. In outward appearance, he was a crucified troublemaker; in reality, he is the water of life--God's provision for our salvation from sin and death.

Grumblers in ancient Israel were no less worthy of God's intervention than we are. Yet, Christ died for our sins, and for all others'. From the smiting he endured comes the life we enjoy--life eternal, abundant and free! How can we not praise him?

28. Impartial Justice

Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?
(Numbers 20:10).

By God's own assessment, Moses was the meekest man of his generation. Here he speaks "out of character" in a moment of angry pride. He placed himself alongside God as an equal, not an agent; as a possessor of power, not its channel. In doing so, he forfeited an entrance into the promised land.

No one sins with impunity, not even the greatest of human leaders. Through Moses, God taught his people that divine justice is impartial. No man rises so high that God cannot swiftly bring him down.

The humblest man sinned through pride. We are constantly warned to guard our weak points. Moses' failure reminds us that we must post sentries at our strong points also.

Lord, impress us deeply with the fact that your chosen leaders stand with the people under you. They do not stand with you above the people. Let us keep our place always, Lord. We are but sinners saved by grace.

29. Travel Directions

We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left (Numbers 20:17).

Life is a journey, and blessed are those who travel the king's highway.

Jesus said, "I am the way." To walk the king's highway is to pattern our lives by his, to live as he lived in this world. From him as "the way" we must not turn to the right or left. We do not blink the fact that attractions abound and siren voices call. But nothing we could gain by leaving the highway compares with the rich rewards, present and future, that crown the lives of those who walk with Jesus.

Moses spoke these words to assure the king of Edom that the people of Israel posed no threat to the Edomites. They were compelled to detour when the pagan king refused entry to them and backed his denial with armed forces.

The king's highway that we travel leads through Edom. The way is spiritual and the travelers are invincible. We can quit the route, and many have, but we cannot be forced from it by any opposing powers. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world.

The Lord secures the way!

30. Saved from Death

So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived (Numbers 21:9).

The solution took the form of the problem, and life came from death. That points us to the mystery of the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. He became one of us and died for us to rescue us from that eternal death which is the consequence of rebellion against God.

This is how Jesus interpreted his mission to the world. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:15). We refuse to substitute the opinion of any critic for Jesus' own interpretation.

"Believes" interprets "looked." Deliverance comes, not by looking at but looking to the divinely prescribed remedy. The mere fact of his death saves none. Trust in the given purpose of that death brings salvation.

How strange the remedy! How simple the condition! How stupendous the outcome!

We looked and we live. Hallelujah!

31. In God's Hands

Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you
(Numbers 21:34).

We rejoice to know that we are in God's hands. His foes as well as his friends are in his hands. That truth takes a while to soak in, Evil forces that oppose him and his people seem to rage out of control, but he sets limits to them and brings judgment upon them.

It takes us even longer to realize that "Do not be afraid" doesn't mean, "I won't let you be hurt." God does not exempt his people from suffering but he does preserve them from destruction. He has allowed some who trusted in him to be imprisoned, tortured and slain, but they were not defeated or destroyed. They triumphed spiritually and eternally, and that's all that finally matters.

Being in God's hands does not assure us of peace and safety or of comfort and ease. We are assured of resurrection and heaven.

On the cross Jesus committed his spirit into the Father's hands. That didn't soften the nails or deaden the pain, but it guaranteed ultimate and eternal victory. We commend our spirits into those same hands, not knowing what awaits us, but knowing who upholds us.

32. God's Answers

I will bring you back the answer the Lord gives me (Numbers 22:8).

The Lord has answers to the significant questions of our existence. Furthermore, he is more willing to guide us than we are to be led. If we come to him in sincerity and submission, he will show us the path of life and give us strength for the journey upon it.

God does not always answer immediately. His silence must be trusted as surely as his speech. When Jesus cried from Calvary, "My God, why?" there was no voice from heaven as there had been at his baptism and transfiguration. God broke the silence, however, with the resurrection--a mighty, everlasting "Yes" to the purpose of Jesus life and death.

Good men are baffled by God's silences, but wicked men are frustrated by his answers. They intensify their resistance to him as did those who sought to hire Balaam. They substitute their own answers for those God gives--to their own destruction.

Only God's answers are worth bringing back. In them we can trust, and by them we can live. Amen.

33. Who Is Your Company?

God came to Balaam and asked, "Who are these men with you?"
(Numbers 22:9).

The Lord already knew who they were, but Balaam needed to know--really know--who they were and why they had come. He needed to know them as enemies of God and his people. God's questions are never asked to elicit information from us, but to awaken us to reality in situations that could be destructive.

His questions do not arise from ignorance, for he knows all things. They arise from gracious concern for those about to ruin themselves by opposing him.

We must answer to the Lord for the company we keep, and for our reasons to keep that company. Jesus was constantly criticized for keeping bad company, but he kept bad company for good reasons--like a doctor consorts with the sick and a savior consorts with the lost. Demas, on the other hand, forsook good people for bad because he loved the world and not the Lord.

Whoever we are with, let it be for upright reasons or we will be downright ruined.

34. Clear Orders

Do not go with them (Numbers 22:12).

The Lord's orders were blunt and clear. Balaam could not mistake the Lord's will in the situation. His only options were obedience or disobedience. He could not plead confusion or ambiguity.

That was how God dealt with Adam and Eve. Their sin, like Balaam's, was sheer rebellion. It could not be explained away as misunderstanding.

Indeed, that is how God deals with all of us. Most folks are not nearly so troubled by what is unclear in Scripture as by what is too plain to miss. "You shall," "You shall not," are clear enough to guide the committed and to strip the rebellious of alibis.

Jesus is Lord and we are his servants. "Do" and "do not" are his to speak. "Yes" and "no" are ours to speak, but the yes leads to life and the no to death. At whatever cost, let us say "Yes" to his commands. He speaks because he loves us. Let us respond positively because we love him.

35. Balaam's Folly

I will find out what else the Lord will tell me (Numbers 22:19).

Deep within, Balaam must have known that the Lord would not change his mind because Balaam's bribe had been enlarged. His phrase, "what else," was an insult to God's integrity.

Was he surprised and delighted when God said, "Go with them"? He should have trembled in fear and repented in haste. God commands but he does not coerce. He respects the power of choice he has given to people. If we insist upon having our way, he allows it--but it brings ruin. God permits what he cannot approve, but with our wrong choices come consequences we have no power to cancel.

Balaam lusted for material gain. To justify his desires he sought to create God in his own image. To greed he added libel by even approaching God again in hope of approval. He got his way and it was devastating. He gained the desired permission but lost the anticipated reward. The price of rebellion is always too great.

36. Road Block

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth....The Lord opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn (Numbers 22:28, 31).

A miracle of sound was followed by a miracle of sight. A donkey spoke and then a human donkey saw. The Lord goes to great lengths to save us from the folly of our abused freedom. How great is his grace, how petty our sins!

A donkey may speak but only God can open a sinner's eyes. He will block the road to destruction, but he will not coerce a U-turn. Those who persist in their rebellion will be allowed to self-destruct.

Think of how Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying, "I would...you would not..." He did all he could to open the eyes and hearts of stubborn men, but at last he conceded, saying, "Your house is left unto you desolate."

The road to hell was blocked with the cross of Calvary, love's strongest appeal to sinners. Those who trample that love are the agents of their own destruction (Heb. 10:29-31).

Lord, your love has saved us. Our hearts and mouths shall praise you.

37. Honest Confession

I have sinned (Numbers 22:34).

This is an easy confession to make but a hard one to mean. Unless one is willing to stop, deprecating his course is not worth the breath it takes to confess. Sincerity, not facility, is the test of confession. How sincere Balaam was, only God knows.

Years ago I heard of a man who confessed to his priest that he had stolen some hay from a neighbor. When asked "How much," the thief confessed to a whole stack because he going back for the other half that night. I have dealt with similar penitents across the years.

When confession is honest, forgiveness is swift. Our God delights in showing mercy. He has said, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:23). There is sometimes confession without forgiveness, but there is no forgiveness without confession.

Let us praise God for pardoning our sins. They were many and grievous, but his grace abounded to induce penitence and to bestow pardon.

38. A Restricted Message

I must speak only what God puts in my mouth (Numbers 22:38).

The words of Balaam make a good motto for preaching. The Christian minister has a given message to proclaim, given in the gospel and in the Bible. He is not at liberty to amend it or to substitute for it. God has bound preaching to the exposition and application of his word. Those who preach otherwise are not merely truants, they are traitors--traitors to the word and to those who need to hear the word.

Balaam's words, if practiced, would shorten many sermons.

When Balaam restricted himself to the message God gave, it cost him the reward that Balak had offered. There is always a price to pay for honest preaching, for God's word does not flatter people, nor does it sanction their selfish schemes. It condemns sin and demands repentance, a hard pill for the proud and profane to swallow. Those who proclaim God's message will often encounter a backlash of anger and opposition. For the sake of God's word they must endure men's wrath.

“What God puts in my mouth” he takes from my heart and mind. Such scriptures as this one do not excuse a preacher from the study and self-application of God's word.

39. God's Message in Man's Mouth

The Lord put a message in Balaam's mouth (Numbers 23:5).

The Lord's message was not what Balaam wanted to speak, but it was the message that others needed to hear. The Lord is concerned that preachers be truthful, not that they be popular. To curry favor with people at the cost of withholding divine truth implicates the preacher in their destruction. He is a murderer of souls who lacks the courage to preach the whole gamut of truth. All who preach should be able to say with Paul, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God," and "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you." When preparing to preach, a preacher should be guided by the question, "What do the people need to hear," not "What are the people wanting to hear."

When Balaam refused to curse those whom God purposed to bless, Balak commanded him to neither curse nor bless (v. 25). When God puts a message in a man's mouth, silence is not an option. At any cost to himself the preacher must voice God's word. The giver of the message will also give the grace and courage to proclaim it.

40. The Winner's Death

Let me die the death of the righteousness (Numbers 23:10).

We should all echo this sentiment of Balaam. "The death of the righteous" should be our aspiration.

What Balaam meant by righteous we do not know for certain. But we know from the Bible that one is righteous who lives in Christ, by Christ and for Christ. Righteousness comes through faith in him who "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One," is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:1, 2), and our hearts can rest in that truth as we face death.

To die the death of the righteous one must live the life of the righteous. In God's word righteousness is more than a legal relationship; it is a way of life. "He who does what is right is righteous."

The righteous gain everything at death; the unrighteous lose everything. We don't want to die as losers, Lord. Guide us "in paths of righteousness" for your name's sake, and we will dwell in your house forever.

41. The Truth

God is not a man that he should lie (Numbers 23:19).

Men lie so much they almost lose the power to recognize and embrace the truth. How can it be otherwise when a lie is coiled at the center of every sinner's being?

The Bible decrees that he "who speaks the truth from his heart" may live in communion with God (Psalm 15:1-2). God's truth repulses every lie. Like a flame it will refine or destroy all that is false.

When he became a man the Lord did not lie. "The Word became flesh...full of grace and truth." Jesus said, "I tell you the truth," and he did so at the cost of his life. His resurrection was God's seal upon truth, God's triumph over lies. He is "the truth" forever, and we must "walk in the truth" or perish with the lies.

When we repent of all the lies we have told and lived, the Lord will graciously forgive and change us. We will then want nothing in this world at the expense of truth. To speak the truth in love and to abide in him who is "the true God and eternal life" is the cry of every true believer's heart today.

42. Unfailing Promises

Does he promise and not fulfill? (Numbers 23:19).

The Lord keeps his word. What he promises he fulfills. The passage of time, the opposition of evil, the expense of truth--none of these prevent him from doing what he promised to do.

Men sometimes fail to keep their word from lack of ability. They make promises, fully intending to keep them, but are defeated by reversals of fortune. Good men in bad times have suffered that embarrassment.

Men also fail to keep their promises for lack of integrity. Some make promises with no intention of fulfilling them. They lie to exploit others for their own advantage. If honoring their promises should disadvantage them, they feel at liberty to forsake their word.

Men may fail to keep their word for lack of memory. Mental or physical infirmities may cause them to forget the promises they have made.

The Lord's promises are guaranteed by his perfect ability, integrity and memory. When he promises, "it's as good as done." His promises are our security. They enable us to live in trust and peace and victory. Amen!

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44. A Tragic End

They also killed Balaam (Numbers 31:8).

Balaam was a puzzled and puzzling prophet. At times he spoke great truths, but not always willingly. He chose to live, not by the truths he uttered, but by the value system of a lying world. Numbered with God's enemies, he shared their defeat. Sin with the world and you die with the world.

In a sense Balaam "died with his boots on"--and his feet in his mouth. He failed to learn in mercy what at last he learned in judgment. A man has to choose sides. He is for God or against God. The choice is one of life or death.

Balaam was not the first or last to proclaim to others the truth by which he did not live. Jesus indicted the Pharisees and scribes who sat "in Moses' seat" but did not practice what they preached (Matt. 23:1-4). Their lips and their lives were not synchronized.

Perhaps the present holds as many tragic examples of this hypocrisy as the past. And probably, apart from God's grace and mercy, we would be among the worst offenders. We are no better or stronger than was Balaam, but we have yielded to a higher person and power.

45. Certain Judgment

You may be sure that your sins will find you out (Numbers 32:33).

This means more than the exposure of secret sins. It means that all sins will be judged and punished.

The context makes it clear that we sin against God when we fail to help our brothers and sisters. The essence of sin is selfishness. The nemesis of sin is our unselfish God.

We escape judgment only by turning from sin and trusting in the Lord. For the sake of Christ, who died for our sins, God will forgive us freely and fully and forever. Apart from the Son's atoning death and the Father's forgiving love we have no refuge from judgment. Sin will find us out and do us in.

Judgment may be delayed but it has not been canceled. Some foolishly think they have sinned with impunity because punishment does not immediately result. A rude awakening awaits them. Somewhere, sometime, the ax will be swung and the tree will be felled.

The wise will take refuge in the cross. It protects us from deserved ruin and teaches us to serve others.

46. Possess the Gift

Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you...for I have given you the land to possess (Numbers 33:52-53).

The Lord owned the land and he could choose the tenants. He gave the land to Israel, but they had to fight and toil to claim the gift. He did not drop from heaven a title to uncontested land. He gave and they fought.

This is true in our spiritual lives. Eternal life is God's gift, but we are enjoined to "Fight the good fight of the faith" and "Take hold of the eternal life to which [we] have been called" (1 Tim. 6:12).

God does not chase the "ites" from Canaan while we sit on the porch lazily fanning our faces. We must possess, through battle, what he has provided and promised by grace. We do not earn his gifts by our own struggles, but we do not possess them without those struggles. And the greatest foes we encounter are not the world or the devil but the apathy and cowardice of our own hearts.

God's gifts are worth our battles. Help each of us today to be "a good soldier of Christ Jesus."